Using Small Groups and Partners to Enhance Instruction for English Language Learners

Adrienne L. Herrell and Michael Jordan
California State University, Fresno

Skills grouping (Gibbons, 1993) is the act of arranging students in groups based on their need for instruction in a specific skill. Skills grouping is done for a short period of time, usually for only a few lessons, and is effective only when the groups are based on the teacher’s knowledge of the language and skill levels of the students. The criterion for grouping is based on teacher observation of a specific instructional need. This greatly enhances the delivery of comprehensible input because the lessons are planned to scaffold learning at the students’ present level of functioning (Krashen, 1985).

Skills groups tend to be heterogeneous as far as reading levels and overall academic functioning are concerned. A skills group might consist of students reading on a range of levels. Skills groups consist of students with a specific instructional need, for instance, a group of students who are not using quotation marks correctly or a group of students who need instruction in solving math problems involving fractions. Skills groups are used effectively in the teaching of language usage, reading, language arts, and mathematics skills.

Partner work (Meyers, 1993) is a form of cooperative learning that is particularly effective with English language learners because of the opportunities for verbal interaction and support it provides (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002). In partner work the teacher pairs two students to accomplish a learning task. They are given specific instructions and are expected to accomplish a process or product to share with the group or with other pairs.

Peer tutoring (Thonis, 1994) is a strategy in which a student who has already achieved certain skills works with a classmate to help him/her acquire the skills. It differs from partner work because partners work together, sharing the responsibilities. Peer tutoring is effective with English language learners for several reasons. A peer who has mastered a higher level of proficiency in academic skills and English usage can often support learning by explaining the assignment in the student’s first language or modeling what is expected. The peer tutoring situation often lowers anxiety for the learner because questions can be answered more readily on a one-to-one basis and the students are less likely to be inhibited. Questions can even be answered in the home language when the students come from the same language background. Peer tutoring also provides the tutor with positive feelings of self-esteem and accomplishment as the tutee gains knowledge and English proficiency.

Skills Grouping: Step-By-Step
The steps in implementing skills grouping are the following.
• **Observe and document language levels** - Set up a method for observing and documenting students' language levels, learning, and classroom performance. See the anecdotal records and performance sampling sections in this text for suggestions.

• **Review needs for instruction** - Frequently review the records you keep of the students' levels of functioning and needs for instruction and look for commonalities on which to base instruction. Form skills groups based on these commonalities.

• **Design and implement lessons** - Design a lesson to teach the skill for which the group has a common need. Explain the skill, model it, and give the group opportunities to practice using the skill under your guidance. As a follow-up to the lesson, give the students an authentic task that requires the use of the skill just taught. Observe the students' use of the skill in the assigned task. Celebrate with the students who are using the skill effectively and plan another lesson focusing on the same skill for the students who need more instruction. Note that the skills groups are very flexible because future groups are formed on the basis of need. The students who achieve the objective of the lesson are not included in the next group of students reviewing the skill.

The steps in implementing partner work are the following:

• **Pair the students** - Decide the purpose of the partner work to be done before you assign the pairs. If language development is one of the main purposes of the pairing, make sure one of the partners can provide a strong English model.

• **Identify and train potential tutors** - If one student is going to work as a tutor for the other, instead of the students working together, the student acting as a tutor must be given some training. Identify students who have proficiency in the academic areas selected and who could provide tutoring for other students. Provide training to the peer tutors in
  
  • how to pose questions that support thinking.
  • how to break the task into manageable pieces.
  • when to explain in the first language.
  • how to support English vocabulary development.

• **Match students** - If the object of the partner work is peer tutoring, match the students who need tutoring with peer tutors, considering such things as gender, home language, and personality.

• **Model the task** - Model the task to be done. Choose one student to act as your partner for the demonstration and walk through the steps to be done. List the tasks on a chart or chalkboard to serve as a reminder of the steps in the process and the expectations of what will be accomplished.

• **Provide support and practice** - Circulate among the pairs during the activity, giving them feedback on the way they are working together and
communicating. Support pairs who are struggling by entering into their interactions by modeling strategies they can use to get the task done.

- **Share progress** - Provide an opportunity for the pairs to share their process or product with another pair or the whole group. Celebrate their accomplishments and review the language they were able to use.

### Applications and Examples

#### Example 1 – Mr. Santiago’s Second Grade

Mr. Santiago’s second graders are listening intently to his reading of *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* (Fox, 1985). When he finishes reading the book, he reviews the story by creating a flip book labeled *Beginning, Middle,* and *End.* He asks the students to tell the things that happen at the beginning of the story. As they mention the elements in the beginning of Mem Fox’s wonderful book, he reviews them, “We meet the characters, Wilfred Gordon, Miss Nancy, and the other old folks at the home. We learn about the setting, that Wilfred Gordon lives next door to the old people’s home. We learn about the problem, that Miss Nancy has lost her memory.” As he talks about the elements, Mr. Santiago lists *Characters, Setting,* and *Problem introduced* under *Beginning* on the flip book. Mr. Santiago repeats the process for the *Middle* section of the flip book and writes, *Problem gets worse, Characters are developed.* Under *End* on the flip book, Mr. Santiago writes *Problem solved.* His flip book now looks like the one shown here.

![Flip Book Diagram](image)

Mr. Santiago asks each student to think about a memory they have that they could write about. He gives them time to think and jot some notes about their memories. Next, Mr. Santiago asks Erina to come up front and act as his partner so he can show the students what they will be doing next.

“I have written some notes about my memory. I will use my notes to tell you my story. As I tell you my story, I want you to take notes on this flip book labeled *Beginning, Middle,* and *End.* You are to take notes about my story because you will help me decide if I need to add anything to my story so that it will be more interesting. You will also be watching to see that I have included all the important parts of my story.”

Mr. Santiago then tells his story and Erina writes the names of the characters by the word *Characters* on the *Beginning* section of the flip book. As he tells
about the setting she writes a few words by Setting and writes a few words by Problem introduced as he tells about the problem. Erina continues to take notes as Mr. Santiago completes his story.

“Now that I have told my story to Erina, I want her to look at her notes to see if I have left out any important parts. Erina, what do you think?”

“I don’t have any notes in the Middle section under Characters are developed. I think you need to tell me some more about the characters in the middle of the story to make it more interesting.”

“Good, I can do that when I actually write my story inside the flip book. That will be the next part. For now we need to work in pairs to tell our stories to our partners. Then they can take notes and help us to make sure we have all the parts to make our stories as interesting as Mem Fox’s story about Wilfred Gordon.”

Mr. Santiago gives the students time to think about their stories and jot some notes. Then he pairs the students up, making sure that there is a strong English speaker in each pair. The partners tell their stories to each other, creating the Beginning, Middle, and End notes on the cover of the flip books. Once everyone has told their stories and received feedback from their partners, they get to work actually writing the stories in the flip books. They know exactly what to write now that they’ve told the stories and received advice from their partners.

Example 2 – Mr. Tyler’s Eleventh Grade English

Mr. Tyler is reading his 11th-grade essays, and he notices that a number of the students are still having difficulty with the proper use of the homophones there, their, and they’re. As he reads the essays, he makes a list of the students who are still confusing these words. A little later he notices several students are confused about when to use an apostrophe in it’s. Several of these same students are also using apostrophes inappropriately with nouns, sometimes creating possessives when they really need plurals. After Mr. Tyler completes the reading of the essays, he has three skills group lists and decides that he will use some of the class time each day for the next week to work on these specific skills.

Mr. Tyler has identified the need for skills grouping in his classes. He has an additional problem because his classes meet for only 50 minutes and he must find time to teach skills groups while not wasting the time of the students in his classes who do not need this instruction. Although he is surprised that the students he has identified as misusing simple grammar and vocabulary in their essays are not all in his basic writing class, he realizes that he cannot ignore these errors in students nearing high school graduation.

Mr. Tyler designs a group assignment lesson that will enable him to teach the skills he has identified and still maintain the momentum for the rest of his class. Then he divides each class into cooperative groups. He calls students into a skills group to work with him on the skills he has identified. The rest of the class works in cooperative groups to identify a writing goal and design a presentation for the class using literature to demonstrate the ways in which different authors accomplish this goal. Mr. Tyler begins the class by conducting a brainstorming
session in which the class identifies some of the writing goals they have. The list includes writing good dialogue, building tension in the plot development, using a rich vocabulary to make the writing interesting, developing interesting characters, understanding the use of metaphor and simile, determining approaches to creating, and developing a problem and solution.

After the list is generated, Mr. Tyler divides the students into cooperative groups, placing one student from his skills group into each of the cooperative groups. The cooperative groups each identify a goal they want to research and begin to look at the literature they have been reading for good examples.

Mr. Tyler calls his skills group together and introduces the problem he has discovered in reading their essays. “I will be working with this small group for a short time each day for a while to help you to overcome a problem that I discovered in reading your essays,” he begins. Mr. Tyler gives an explanation of the differences among the homophones there, their, and they’re and how important it is that the words be used correctly. He sends the students back to their cooperative groups to begin to look for the examples needed for the group presentations on the way the professional writers approach the goals identified by the class. The skills group has one added task. They are to find sentences in the literature that demonstrate the correct usage of the homophones they are studying and copy at least one sentence that employs each of the homophones. For homework that night the skills group is assigned a paragraph to be written about an imaginary group of people. The skills group is to find a way to use all three forms of the homophone in their paragraph.

Mr. Tyler follows his instruction with partner work in which one of the students from the special skills group is paired with another student. The partners work together to proof their papers before submitting them. The students proofread each other’s papers, giving the student working on special skills two chances to identify correct usage of the homophones and apostrophes.

Mr. Tyler finds that the system he has set up works well. He identifies needs for skills groups and then provides time for cooperative group work, which can continue while he conducts quick skills instruction. He follows up with short assignments in which he monitors for understanding of the skills.

He uses one additional technique to help the students in monitoring their own progress. He duplicates copies of the skill or vocabulary rules for the students to attach to the inside cover of their writing folders. Before they turn in any assignments they must work collaboratively with another student on editing by proofreading their writing for the types of errors that give them difficulty. Mr. Tyler finds that making the students aware of the errors they are committing helps them to self-monitor and self-correct. They are refining their use of the English language (Swain, 1995).

**Assessment to Ensure Appropriate Instruction**

Small groups and partners should document their work to provide practice in self-evaluation and active involvement of each of the members. The chart below provides an example of a self-evaluation form that can be used for this process.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Members</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Contribution to group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Member 1</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member 2</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member 3</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

Skills grouping is a way to provide focused instruction for small groups of students with shared needs. Because skills groups are created to address a specific need, they are not long-standing groups. Instruction is given, skills are practiced and monitored, and the groups change. If some students require further instruction, that instruction is provided, but only for those who need it. This form of grouping is effective because students are receiving lessons tailored to their needs and the other students in the class are given assignments that allow them to practice their skills at appropriate levels without being bored by instruction they do not need.

Partner work can be used in many ways across the curriculum. By pairing students to support one another in the successful completion of the task or to review materials and prepare for an assignment, the students are given opportunities to interact verbally, practice relating facts and concepts, monitor each other’s understanding, or provide home language support. English language learners can be paired in several ways depending on their stages in English acquisition. If a student needs home language explanations, then a perfect partner for that student is another student who shares the same home language and who is also more fluent in English.

If an English language learner is fairly fluent in English but needs more practice in speaking and writing English, then a good English speaking role model makes a good partner. Partners can also be used to create bilingual books and labels, versions of favorite literature in various languages, or illustrated books using partners with strengths in writing and illustration. Partners can be used in math and science by pairing students with strengths such as writing and science or art and science.

References


